

IS FEMINIST STUDIES

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The Number One Question about Feminism

Jennifer Baumgardner and
Amy Richards

"I consider myself a hard-core feminist," said a twenty-year-old women's studies major at Tulane University in New Orleans. "But is it okay that I wear thong underwear?"

We laughed—in recognition primarily—when we heard this "feminist in a thong" question. At the 150 or so colleges where we have spoken since our book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* hit the shelves, the "can I wear a thong?" type of query is one of the most popular.¹ On the surface, the statement feeds into stereotypes about young women, seeming to reveal that they are oddly obsessed with body image and shopping issues and their personal lives, rather than politics and revolution. On a different level, however, the question is symbolic of young people's relationship to feminism: meaning that the relationship is often personal, invisible, and uncomfortable. This question can be a metaphor for the generation gap between older women's feminism and younger women's. Many older women hear that Tulane student and think, "what's a thong?"

These women worrying about their underwear are not the "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." types. They are women who fear they aren't worthy of being feminists because they haven't done enough—and there are thousands of these women. They are the women's studies majors, the girls who volunteer at the women's center and Planned Parenthood, the ones who organize domestic violence week and Take Back the Night. They are the feminists. In our talks with college students (mostly women, but always a handful of men, too) we spend a lot of time confirming that they are capable of being just as good feminists as anyone else, which brings us back to the issue of the thong.

Young women are into the ideals and goals of the women's movement, but they are afraid. The real question being asked by that Tulane student is: Can I be who I am *and* be a feminist? Many young women

sense that the personal decisions they make—having boyfriends, indulging in Brazilian bikini waxes, getting married, wanting to have a body like Gwyneth Paltrow, or being into fashion—permit others to assume that they are dupes of the patriarchy. Aren't these the trappings of femininity that their mothers (or women's studies professors) rejected? *Manifesta* was written in part to address exactly this crowd, the ones who say, "I took the Women in Mass Media class—why do I still feel the need to wear high heels?" We dedicated the book to those of our generation who say, "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." as well as those who say, "I am a feminist, but . . ." because both are statements revealing a person working out a relationship to the women's movement into which they were born. There is no doubt that younger women connect to feminism's ideals. Similarly, they are inspired by its history. What they are often lacking is a sense of *how* to be a feminist. They aren't clear about what feminism requires from them. Often they perceive that their personal lives undermine their political convictions. They often think of feminism as telling them what they can't do, rather than as a philosophy that shows them the potential for what they can do.

There is some historical precedent to this problem, and it relates to that four word feminist mantra many of them learned in their women's studies classes. In the first chapter of our book, "The Dinner Party," we quoted Katha Pollitt. "The personal is political," she wrote of the mantra, "was a way of saying that what looked like individual experiences with little social resonance and certainly no political importance—rape, street harassment, you doing the vacuuming while your husband reads the paper—were part of a general pattern of male dominance and female subordination." Pollitt observed that to make a political argument, you need more than your personal experience. True enough, but the phrase, we wrote, "was misinterpreted to mean that what an individual woman does in her personal life (like watching porn, wearing garter belts, dying her hair, having an affair, earning money, shaving her legs) undermines her feminist credibility, and can be levied against her, like a fine." We concluded: "Thus it has sometimes been used to restrict women rather than to free us" (19).

But feminism is about freeing us. Therefore, although thongs aren't political in and of themselves, the girl wearing one certainly might be. Furthermore, the girl wearing one is still entitled to comment on beauty standards and consumerism. The thong does not disqualify her.

Despite the anxiety that these young women's sartorial choices bring, they tend to have considered these choices at length, and the shaving or Gwyneth-body or high heels are what some of them genuinely want. Personally, they are attracted to these articles of femininity or consumerism but analyze that desire from the perspective of others as a conflict and a potential compromise of their feminism. These young

feminists came of age in a much more disposable, capitalistic time than did their Second Wave predecessors. They do not view rejecting consumerism as synonymous with rejecting patriarchy, but that does not mean they reject feminism.

The reason young feminists debate pop culture and hygiene choices and feel so judged that those issues undermine their feminism is that they don't have a clear basis of feminism in their lives. Feminism, by dint of its success, has become part of the received wisdom for this generation, just as sexism and compulsory heterosexuality were for the previous generation. They learn that consciousness-raising groups were formed. They learn that organizations were created and by whom. They learn that legislation was passed and that groundbreaking books were published. In essence, they learn history and that women had a role in it. They also learn that what they are doing in their own lives bears little resemblance to that Second Wave activism and energy that they so fervently study. These students can probably tell you the difference between a Marxist feminist and a liberal feminist. They can tell you what rights feminism has gained for them, but they may not be able to tell you how feminism relates actively and personally to their real lives right now; that is probably why there is such a focus on what is in their lives (shaving, Gwyneth, high heels). They have been presented with the political analysis of an entirely different generation reacting to its time. This is fine if they focus on gaining critical tools. More often, though, they have ended up with rules.

Our goal is to help these young women build a foundation of feminism in their own lives. Sometimes this requires assuring them that their thong is not an issue, that feminism isn't about what choice you make, but the freedom to make that choice. More often, it is giving them tangible answers to the question: How can I change my world? For instance, while they are learning their feminist history, they aren't always taking away from it the message that sexual harassment laws and equal pay legislation began with one woman saying that she was being groped or underpaid. Nowadays, on a campus, so much has changed and been named, it is hard to see what needs our continued focus as feminists. The absence of women from schools, sports, and workplaces was more obvious than continuing inequalities such as a lack of tenured female professors, unequal funding for girls' sports, or female kitchen-workers earning a sub-standard wage.

When women asked for access in the 1960s and 1970s, eventually their requests seemed reasonable and even necessary. But asking for equality, then and now, is seen, sadly, even for those who are asking for it, as asking for too much. (Wages for housework makes a great slogan, but should parents really get paid for making their children's lunches?)

Second Wave women asked for equality, but what they got, access to

traditional avenues of power, was only a start toward that goal. The act of opening the door was mislabeled "equality." In truth, it was more often just opening the door for a few. This created another problem; it took the onus off of the people who were in power (a.k.a. men) and put it on the few women who got access. (The "women are their own worst enemies" trick came into play rather quickly.) We now know that we have the right to be in the army, in the boardroom, on the President's cabinet, flying airplanes, and playing basketball. We need to focus on the right to be there in equal numbers and the right to equal treatment.

Now we are faced with building a new structure for equality. The fact that access isn't equality plagues our understanding of modern feminism. The main reason the women's movement is perceived as a white middle-class movement, for instance, is that the gains of feminism have been measured by our acceptance in privileged white male spaces. It doesn't take Cornell West to tell you that white women have more access to the white male sphere than women of color. Yet, if we measure feminism by a "quality of life" standard, not by access to elite institutions, feminism's story changes. How much do women of all ages, races, ethnicities, and income brackets think that they are capable of? How do they value themselves and their contribution in the context of their jobs, their relationships, their communities, their bodies, and their own households? Is it significantly more than what women of those same groups thought they could do forty years ago? Yes.

Moving from access to equality—from one generation's breakthroughs to breaking the next generation's barriers, and from received wisdom to feminist insight—is causing some growing pains. How does this play out on college campuses? Women's studies is at a crucial moment: it is highly successful, yet clearly anxious about its *raison d'être*. We see this in the debate about calling the discipline "gender studies" rather than "women's studies." Many people are anxious that this means "losing" the focus on women. We see this when Ellie Smeal comes to campus and only fifteen people show up, causing the women's studies professor to worry that there "is so little interest in feminism."

Because the discussion blames student apathy, opportunities are missed to point out genuine, concrete ways that feminism affects young women's lives. Even when students know exactly what is wrong, they frequently don't have faith that it can be changed and that they can change it. A gung-ho feminist student named Brooke at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for instance, identified the dearth of childcare at her school and noted that many students were in dire need of part-time employment. She knew that the school's infrastructure could utilize students as temps but didn't feel that she was the right person to forge a babysitting service through the university. Brooke saw a barrier and thought: What can I do? Am I allowed to make these things

a feminist issue without the approval of the "feminists"? In other words, if it was such a good idea, wouldn't the real feminists—the ones who invented V-Day, or coined the term sexual harassment, or wrote the books I'm reading—wouldn't they have already thought of it? In *Manifesta*, Kathleen Hanna called this nagging voice "The Phantom." The phantom says, somebody already thought of that. Somebody already wrote that book. Just glom onto someone else's plan.

The reason the phantom has so much power can not be neatly explained by sexism and low self-esteem. We spend so much time talking about what feminism is, or was, and not enough about what it could be. Because we learn so much more from what people do than what they say, we need to take a step back from rhetoric and put the focus on action. What seem to be missing from women's studies are those basic steps that take an observation of an injustice through to political action. Some women's studies departments we've seen are indeed trying to reconnect with their activist roots. They require activist projects or internships as part of a class. They encourage undergraduates to undertake original research, as with the young feminists at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, who are conducting a history of a local separatist feminist community called the Aradians.

Returning to activism—answering the question, what can I do?—is key to understanding feminism for this generation. We think that when more students are engaged in changing their world, they won't care what anyone thinks of their underwear.

NOTE

1. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2000).